

Exploring Graduate Elementary Education Preservice Teachers' Initial Teaching Beliefs

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Abstract

States, universities, and school districts have responded to teacher shortages by designing programs that transition college graduates into teaching careers. The result is an increase in the number of graduate preservice teachers preparing for teaching careers in colleges of education. The purpose of this study is to explore graduate preservice teachers' initial teaching beliefs so as to understand the educational perspectives they bring into the graduate classroom. Data were collected from the initial philosophy statements of 21 graduate preservice teachers enrolled in the first course of a comprehensive MAT program. Findings suggest that graduate preservice teacher educators bring strengths to the classroom that distinguish them from "traditional" undergraduate preservice teachers. These differences warrant careful consideration by teacher educators.

Many states are facing historic shortages in all teaching areas, and today's alarming attrition rates simply exacerbate this shortage. Ingersoll (2002) reports that 14% of all new teachers nationwide leave the profession within their 1st year, and by the end of their 4th year, over 40% of all new teachers are no longer in classrooms. Florida is an excellent example of this national crisis: The state is currently experiencing a profound teacher shortage, with up to 20,000 new teachers needed each year for the foreseeable future (Matus, 2005).

As the demand for teachers increases, states, universities, and school districts are designing programs that quickly transition college graduates into teaching careers. Currently, 47 states have alternative program routes to the classroom, varying in terms of length, coursework, field experiences, degree offered, and rigor (Levine, 2006). This trend results in a marked increase in the number of graduate preservice teachers in colleges of education. These students range in age, previous career, background, and the nature and extent of their experiences in classrooms, when compared with undergraduate preservice teachers (Morton, Williams, & Brindley, 2006). Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research involving this unique and growing population, and as a result, research in this area is both timely and necessary.

The authors in this study assert that an exploration of graduate preservice teachers' initial beliefs about teaching would assist teacher educators in understanding the educational perspectives this growing population brings to the graduate school setting. Furthermore, studying initial beliefs of graduate preservice teachers may assist teacher educators in understanding the working philosophies through which this population explores, develops, and refines their beliefs about teaching during graduate teacher preparation coursework.

Literature Review

Teacher Beliefs

The notion of teacher beliefs is a complex construct that is difficult to identify, define, and describe. A review of the research literature reveals a plethora of terms used synonymously with teacher beliefs including *attitudes, dispositions, knowledge*, and *perspectives* (Pajares, 1992). Because of this variety, defining beliefs is challenging, with much of the confusion resulting from diverse philosophical perspectives. For example, Nespor (1987) described beliefs as being evaluative, affectively stored, and episodic or experience-based in nature. Rokeach (1968) defined beliefs as having multiple components,

with cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements, in essence suggesting that beliefs are comprised of knowledge, emotion, and action. Brown and Cooney (1982) described beliefs as “dispositions in action and major determinants of behavior” that are specific to the context in which they occur (Pajares, 1992, p. 313). The variety of terms and definitions used when discussing teacher beliefs underscores the complex nature of this construct.

Researchers assert that preservice teachers’ beliefs are a powerful vehicle for providing effective teacher preparation and for understanding teachers’ classroom practices and behaviors (Hart, 2004; Pajares, 1992). Preservice teacher beliefs are formed long before they enter their first education course, through a multitude of experiences including students’ apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 1975), their life stories, their work in schools, and media portrayals of teaching (Pugach, 2006). Weinstein (1988) described preservice teachers as having an “unrealistic optimism” regarding their future teaching careers. Similarly, preservice teachers conceptualize teaching as the teacher delivering knowledge and students receiving the content (Doyle, 1997; Richardson, 1996). Researchers suggest that failure to study pre-existing beliefs can inhibit preservice teacher development and the acquisition of new knowledge about becoming a teacher (Morton et al., 2006; Pajares, 1992). Ultimately, studying teacher beliefs is essential given “unexplored entering beliefs may be responsible for the perpetuation of antiquated and ineffectual teaching” (Pajares, 1992, p. 328).

Alternative Certification

Alternative certification programs have been increasing in popularity since the early 1980s due to a combination of factors: teacher shortages, state-sponsored certification programs, and desires to improve teacher preparation (Zeichner & Conklin, 2005); however, research on alternative certification programs is underrepresented in the literature (Levine, 2006; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). One explanation may be the wide parameters used for defining *alternative certification*. Alternative programs run the gamut from traditional graduate programs to expedited licensure in fast-track programs to school district-based certification options (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). Some alternative approaches have been described by Masci and Stotko as a “quick fix” (2006, p. 47), and by Weiner and Newtzie as “fast-track” (2006, p. 155). Levine (2006) summarizes the disparity among alternative certification programs as “linked more by what they *are not* than what they are” (2006, p. 16). In fact, Sindelar, Daunic, and Rennells (2004) suggest that alternative certification programs may be heterogeneous to the point that discussing them as a “whole” is inappropriate. Despite this disparity, alternative certification programs can successfully produce quality educators “when certain program elements—meaningful methods courses, field experience, supervision and mentorship—are in place” (Sindelar et al., 2004, p. 210). Unfortunately, the contention is that many alternative certification programs typically lack these critical elements and are ultimately inefficient (Darling-Hammond, 2000).

While assumptions are made that participants in alternative certification programs are more diverse, older, and include more males, this is largely context-specific, and there are no definitive trends in the literature (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). Some research suggests a larger number of alternative candidates take positions teaching in urban schools (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). The diversity of students enrolled reflects how alternative programs were often created to target specific clientele: career-switchers, racially diverse populations, retired military, and paraprofessionals (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). In essence, the purposes of program creation may influence the demographics of the students who enroll in these programs, and the demographics may influence the type of program.

One model frequently associated with alternative certification is the initial graduate certification program situated in universities. Despite the rapid increase in these programs, there is a lack of research involving graduate preservice teachers. We contend that the life experiences of graduate preservice teachers distinguish them from traditional undergraduate preservice teachers. Consequently, there is a pressing need to develop research that provides insight into the working philosophies through which this student population experiences teacher preparation. As teacher educators, understanding students’ beliefs provides a framework for creating classroom experiences

that intentionally support or conflict with the existing beliefs of students. The significance of this research strand should not be understated as the existing research literature on preservice teacher beliefs focuses almost exclusively on traditional undergraduate preservice teacher education students.

Method

Context of the Study

Five years ago, professors in an elementary teacher education department at a large university in the southeastern United States developed a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in Elementary Education. The program was designed to attract candidates with a baccalaureate degree in a field outside of education into a comprehensive graduate program. Although much of the research literature would categorize this program as alternative certification, the authors contend that this program is *not* by definition "alternative"; rather it is comprehensive. As a result, we consider the classification of comprehensive MAT programs in the literature alongside state and school district pathways to alternative programs (see Zeichner & Schulte, 2001) to be an oversimplification. Alternative pathways to certification in this southeastern state feature reduced training offered to temporary teachers seeking state certification while already beginning to teach in the elementary classroom.

In contrast, the MAT students in this study are required to take 53 credit hours towards their elementary certification, including 9 hours of graduate coursework for English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), 12 hours of coursework in literacy education, and 3 hours each in content methods (science, mathematics, and social studies), classroom management, measurement and assessment, and psychological foundations of learning. In addition, MAT students must successfully complete two semester-long field-based experiences. This MAT program was tailored to meet the specific needs of the prospective second-career teacher, to maintain the high expectations and integrity of graduate level work at the university, and to fulfill the state mandates for elementary certification.

Participants

The participants in this study were 21 first-semester graduate preservice teachers (GPSTs) enrolled in the fall cohort of the Elementary MAT program (see Table 1). All students in the fall cohort chose to participate. They ranged in age from 22 to 49. Two participants were African American and one was Latino; however, all remaining participants were Caucasian. One of the 21 participants was male. All participants were enrolled in an introductory methods course that addressed a wide variety of topics including foundations of teaching, diversity, learning styles, and lesson and unit planning.

Information regarding previous experience, educational background, and degree of experience in elementary classrooms was gathered from the participants during the first class meeting of the introductory methods course.

Table 1
Demographics of the Sample

Gender		Ethnicity	
Females	20	Caucasian	19
Males	1	African American	2
		Latino	1
Number of children		Prior experience in schools	
No children	17	No experience	14
One child	1	Substitute teaching	3
Two children	2	Volunteer	1
Three children	1	Tutoring	1
		Temporary teaching	2

The participants included full-time graduate students with part-time jobs, classroom teachers on temporary certification, and full-time employees from other professions. These students had a wide range of previous experiences and careers in fields such as real estate, banking, event planning, preschool teaching, and restaurant management. In addition, the participants held a wide variety of undergraduate degrees including accounting, communications, and psychology. Of the participants, 6 had experience in elementary classroom settings but the remaining 15 had none. Several of the participants also had their own children in schools. The diversity in age, background, undergraduate degrees, and work experience reflects the varying characteristics of graduate preservice teachers (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Data Collection

As part of a regular course assignment, the GPSTs were asked to write an initial teaching philosophy during the first week of class. The assignment was created by the instructor to establish the GPSTs' initial beliefs about teaching and learning, using six structured prompts related to the course objectives: teaching and learning, classroom environment, students as learners, teaching methodology, parents and communities, and collaboration (Appendix). The course instructor emphasized with the GPSTs that there were no right or wrong answers, and that assignment grades would be earned on task completion, not on the nature of their beliefs. Further, the instructor emphasized her desire to understand what perceptions the GPSTs brought to the first course as a means of designing course instruction. This assignment was completed prior to any course content delivery. A structured approach was chosen over a more open-ended philosophy assignment to encourage GPSTs to consider the multifaceted nature of teaching in elementary classrooms and to activate existing schemas for upcoming course content. In accordance with the literature on teacher beliefs, it is essential to explore preservice teachers' pre-existing beliefs in order to facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge (Morton et al., 2006; Pajares, 1992). We acknowledge that structuring the assignment forced students to consider their beliefs in accordance with the six prompts; however, these prompts were directly connected to course content, and it is what they stated within these prompts that was of interest to us. Their beliefs written in response to these six prompts were entirely of their own construction. The students were given the week between the first and second course meetings to complete the assignment. So as to not unduly influence the GPSTs' responses to this graded assignment, they were not invited to participate in this research study until after their final course grades were submitted at the end of the semester.

Data Analysis

Content analysis required the authors to "search the text for recurring words or themes" (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Initial analysis began with a thorough reading of each participant's teaching philosophy. During this first read, the authors worked independently of one another with their own copies of the data sets, and they made analytical notes as they familiarized themselves with the students' philosophies.

Next, working collaboratively and beginning with the first prompt, we read through each participant's writing, charting key phrases, words, and concepts. We were interested in the emerging themes within each of the six prompts. While we acknowledge that we asked them to reflect on their beliefs about certain aspects of teaching, it is what they said in response to each prompt that is the focus of the analysis. We then clustered like comments, using analytic memos—"developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis" (Patton, 2002, p. 463). No predetermined themes were used for organizing the GPSTs' comments; rather as clustered units of meaning accumulated, we were able to establish emerging themes. This process was repeated for each of the six prompts. On numerous occasions during the data analysis process, we returned to the GPSTs' original philosophy statements to confirm the viability of emerging themes. Initially, the emergent themes were focused *within* each prompt. As the analysis continued, it became apparent that the prompts themselves were interrelated and that notions and concepts described by the GPSTs were not

confined to the six individual prompts, but instead appeared *across* the students' responses to the prompts. As a result, the responses across the sample are best represented by five interrelated themes indicative of the six original prompts. The subthemes that emerged are representative of the GPSTs' specific pre-existing beliefs described in their philosophy statements.

Findings

The following themes are reflective of the GPSTs' responses to the six prompts and are summarized in Table 2. Emerging subthemes, indicative of the GPSTs' pre-existing beliefs in each of the themes are shared below. These results feature the voice of the sample by using the words *they* chose in their writing and by citing sentences and paragraphs attributed to particular students as illustrative of a theme. In order to demonstrate the results are representative of the sample, we used the assigned number codes with each of the following examples.

Table 2
A Summary of Themes

Theme	Subthemes
Learner success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning theories • Characteristics of successful learners
Elements of teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining teaching and learning • Role of teacher in learning process
The learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional and social climate • Classroom conditions for learning
Collaboration within the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration within the classroom • Collaboration among teachers
Community beyond the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families as teachers • Communities as resources

Theme 1: Learner Success

Across the six prompts, the GPSTs described learner success as dependent on the teacher's knowledge of learning theories, as well as on the characteristics of the individual learners.

Learning theories. Despite just beginning formal teacher preparation, the GPSTs already owned clear notions of learning theory, and prior to any coursework were able to share these ideas. They depicted learning as a cognitive activity and wrote about conceptual connections, discovery learning, and multiple intelligences as mirrored in the following three statements:

Student 13: "Students learn best when they understand the concepts and reasons for doing things and make connections in their brains, not simply memorizing facts."

Student 5: "Learning based on creating conceptual connections strengthens our comprehension and encourages curiosity."

Student 1: "Learning is best facilitated when students are guided toward a concept, and then they are left to develop it in their own minds."

In addition, seven of the students spoke specifically to the notion of "active" learning and participation. Typical of these comments, Student 13 asserted:

I believe my students learn best when they actively participate in the learning process. As active learners, my students are excited about learning and eager to get involved. I create an environment where they feel that there is value in asking questions. As inquisitive students, they challenge their minds and their interest grows in unison with their learning.

Characteristics of the successful learner. This subtheme was evident in the philosophy of every GPST, and the descriptions of learner characteristics were entirely positive in nature. Most students spoke to the dispositions required of the successful learner, using descriptors such as *excited*, *energetic*, *responsible*, *motivated*, and *hardworking*. There were also several comments regarding the diversity of the learner—the fact that they have different interests and backgrounds and bring different perspectives to the classroom. Typical of these, Student 8 commented, “I believe that every student is different and that every student brings with them something special ... and I get them excited about their strengths.” Similarly, Student 6 summarized the notion of diversity saying, “All of my students are smart. They just have different interests, backgrounds, and ways of learning.”

The GPSTs asserted that the students must be engaged for teaching and learning to be successful. They suggested students should pay attention to directions, use original thoughts and ideas, keep their interest in learning and have a desire to learn, while looking to the teacher with “respect and expectation” (Student 13).

Theme 2: Elements of Teaching

The GPSTs identified the critical elements of teaching across the six prompts by defining the language, recognizing the interpersonal relationship between teacher and learner, and identifying specific teaching strategies.

Defining teaching and learning. Seventeen of the GPSTs defined the relationship between teaching and learning. They chose broad, sweeping descriptors such as “the basis for productive society” (Student 17), “learning as the key to knowledge” (Student 21), “learning as a constant state for all of us” (Student 14), and “the sharing of culture” (Student 3). Most students, however, also spoke specifically to the relationship between teaching and learning. They described this relationship using terms such as *intertwined*, *reciprocal*, *meshed*, and *connected*. They asserted that this relationship is vital and continuous and requires reciprocity and responsibility from both the teacher and the learner.

Role of teacher in learning process. The GPSTs considered the role of teacher as critical in teaching and learning. They claimed the attributes of a successful teacher included confidence, comfort, responsibility, trust, and an understanding of the developmental needs of children. Further, they suggested that successful teachers knew the children that they taught and empowered the students through authentic, engaged, and creative learning experiences. Two students noted how the teacher also learns from the child.

Most GPSTs also associated methods of planning and delivery with successful teaching, describing specific active learning strategies such as notions of interactive group work and the use of games and projects in an engaging and fun learning environment. They spoke to the teacher’s role in capturing the students’ attention to increase comprehension. The list of recommended techniques included engaging their minds, using imagination, stimulating discussion, being available to the students, making learning fun, and utilizing positive reinforcement and encouragement. The word *fun* was frequently used in statements such as “create fun, trusting, and informal learning environments” (Student 20), “use varied learning activities that are fun and stimulating” (Student 21), and “learning can be fun” (Student 1).

In addition, three students overtly referenced “planning” in lesson construction, and other GPSTs also referred to activities such as independent work, group projects, using technology and multimedia, and honoring recess time as methods for helping engage students. The GPSTs discussed their role in engaging the learner with phrases such as “making connections to interests,” “various modalities,” “higher level thinking,” “multiple intelligences,” “scaffolding information,” and “using patterns.”

Theme 3: The Learning Environment

Elements of the learning environment emerged across the GPSTs' responses to the six prompts. They described the environment in terms of the social and emotional climate and the conditions required for learning.

Emotional and social climate. The emotional and social climate was prioritized and elaborated on in their narratives. Each one of the GPSTs spoke to notions of warm, safe, inviting, comfortable, and happy classroom environments. Student 9 asserted, "My classroom is a home away from home, and the members are a family. We are there to support and care for each other." Similarly, Student 5 concluded, "I believe that my classroom is a sanctuary for free thought and respectful self-expression." The students also made statements of expected behaviors in the classroom. These included notions of students learning from one another, learning about and appreciating cultural differences and diversity, and interacting with one another respectfully. This idea is best summarized by the statement, "My classroom is a place where students can learn not only about key subject areas, but also key social skills such as responsibility, empathy, self-control, and cooperation" (Student 21).

In addition, GPSTs described the need for teachers to challenge and encourage the students while demonstrating compassion, treating them with respect, and giving them personal attention. A common notion that underpinned this theme was the idea of teacher responsibility in the classroom environment. As Student 16 asserted, "I believe all of my students are smart and capable of learning. It is my responsibility to find the trigger for each child that will open up a new world." Further, students described their responsibility in terms of professional reflection and development. The GPSTs stressed that teachers must be interested in the material, retain a positive attitude and devotion to children, continually re-evaluate and improve themselves as professionals, and be organized and enthusiastic in their work. Examples include:

Student 19: "My energetic, positive attitude captures my students' attention and allows them to easily understand my lesson plans. Negative feedback, negative experiences, and a negative attitude equal unmotivated students."

Student 9: "As a teacher, I must continue to learn from further schooling, from workshops, from reading, and from sharing with my peers. There is always room for more knowledge and more growth as a teacher. I am presented with new problems and need to find new ways to solve them."

Classroom conditions for learning. The GPSTs suggested that a climate favorable for learning, where children feel supported and respected, is essential for successful class discussions, meaningful choices in activities, authentic cooperation, real-life connections, and nurturing relationships. As Student 3 said:

The teacher can help motivate students to learn by giving them a choice in what they learn... I believe that students learn best when it is something that interests them. If you relate the topics that the students are required to learn to things that interest them, then they will be more motivated.

The GPSTs portrayed the physical environment by describing stations and centers, seating arrangements, and the classroom library. The GPSTs recognized that student learning is dependent on the physical resources associated with learning, including books, technology, learning centers, and the use of music. Fourteen of the students spoke specifically to the aesthetics of the classroom describing posters, pictures, plants, and furniture. As Student 17 noted, "My classroom is colorful, with no dead space, meaning there is always something to provide visual stimulation."

Theme 4: Collaboration Within the School

When asked to describe their beliefs about collaboration, GPSTs used descriptors such as integral, necessary, fundamental, and vital. Two subthemes emerged in terms of GPSTs portrayal of collaboration: within the classroom and among teachers.

Collaboration within the classroom. This theme focused on teacher-student and student-student relationships. Fourteen of the 21 GPSTs wrote specific comments about the interdependency of the teacher and the students. They noted the learning process is collaborative and that everyone is a teacher and everyone is a learner. Student 5 exemplified this interdependency:

I believe that teaching and learning are processes not roles. Though traditionally I am the 'teacher' and my students are the 'learners,' I stand to learn as much from them as they from me. My students are full of original thought and ideas from which all other members of our classroom community can benefit and grow.

Two-thirds of the GPSTs asserted that teachers should both ask for and be open to students sharing their opinions and feedback. The GPSTs suggested that within-class collaboration occurred through creation of classroom rules, opportunities to input their ideas, practice in collaborative group settings, making choices in assignments based on interest, teachers' pedagogy, and negotiating time management. An additional seven students focused on the developmental value of teacher-student collaboration, stating students would develop social skills such as respect and would practice interactive experiences that would prepare them for life. These notions were best summarized by Student 17.

Collaboration also teaches children important social skills. They learn how to work with others, how to accept responsibility for their portion of the work, and how to deal with people with whom they do not get along. Working together also allows students to see other students' view points on a topic or subject, which will ultimately enrich the students' learning experiences.

Collaboration among teachers. The data indicated that collaboration among teachers leads to a sense of community and teamwork. In terms of teacher-to-teacher collaboration, the GPSTs noted benefits such as a knowledge sharing, professional support, and mentoring. Specifically, students described these notions in terms of discussions of the scope and sequence of curriculum, coplanning, new teacher mentorship, the sharing of resources, and purposeful partnerships. They also identified the interpersonal benefits of listening to and understanding one another's perspectives, the benefits of consultation, and of simply "bouncing ideas." Illustrative of these ideas was the following quote from Student 13: "As part of a dynamic team ... [teachers should] use our expertise to help each other be better at teaching and visit each other's classrooms to share with the students our talents and our areas of specialization. We often collaborate and partner in order to maximize our creativity and resources." Furthermore, collaboration among teachers was viewed as a professional responsibility.

Theme 5: Community Beyond the School

When asked to reflect on their beliefs about families and schools, the GPSTs conceptualized *community* in broad terms and focused on collaboration across community stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, parents, extended families, community leaders, mentors, and the students. A common notion was that the teacher is the liaison between all stakeholders and should initiate interaction and encourage communication.

Families as teachers. Fundamental to the GPSTs' views, families are responsible for the primary caregiving, the emotional growth and development, and the values associated with schooling for their children. As Student 22 noted:

Students' mindsets about school and learning are often already shaped by the time they begin school, especially if they have observed older siblings' positive or negative reactions to and experiences in school. What students have seen around them in their families and communities regarding reading, school, learning, exploring, questioning, and other issues greatly affect students' perspectives. I want to make sure that parents are aware of this influence on their children so that they can make sure that the students see school and learning as positive experiences.

Eight of the GPSTs noted that teachers depend on parental participation as volunteers in the school environment. An additional seven GPSTs described this participation in the school environment as essential and integral, and they listed numerous volunteer activities, including field trips, reading tutors, speakers. Student 5 illustrated this theme through the following comment:

I believe community and family are my greatest allies in my students' education. Strive as I may, I cannot always teach alone. Each student's family and community is a welcome contributor to our class, be it through at-home involvement, in-school volunteering, or any other assistance willingly provided. I cannot be there to answer my students' questions around the clock, but they can.

Finally, students noted specific procedures for communicating with families, and recognized that the teacher must ensure that families know what is happening at school. Five GPSTs captured the notion of regular updates. As Student 13 explained, "I am sensitive to obstacles that families may face in communicating with teachers. Therefore, I do whatever I can to keep the lines of communication open with parents." Suggested communication modes include letters home, phone calls, newsletters, e-mails, and second-language translations.

Communities as resources. Volunteering in the school reflects a second theme: the community as resource. The GPSTs spoke to the construct of community in the classroom and within and beyond the school. Five GPSTs wrote that within the school community, teachers should share their diversity and different cultures, inform instruction as experts, and contribute as leaders in school events. Beyond the school, GPSTs recognized the students are shaped by their diverse backgrounds and the influences of the community. Believing that students sense support from the wider community, GPSTs emphasized how teachers must be familiar with the community and its influences on students. Ten GPSTs described this influence in terms of diversity of backgrounds, support, community resources, and social problems. They wrote of how teachers should be aware of happenings elsewhere in the school and beyond, and should be sensitive to the anxieties children bring to school. As Student 14 noted:

Community and family can provide a great support system for children, but if a child does not have access to those two things, we as the school must be certain to take their place. The school acts as the community and family in situations in which the students have neither, and I, as their teacher, act as their mother, father, neighbor, confidante, and mentor; every role community and family typically provide.

Discussion

The process of reviewing the results led to extensive conversations between us, but three particular observations merit further discussion: images of teaching at the point of program entry, limited understandings of curriculum, and implications of these beliefs and understandings for program delivery. Given our sample size, we do not claim generalizability. However, we suggest that the insights derived from this study may resonate with teacher educators by demonstrating the importance of exploring the preexisting beliefs of graduate preservice teacher populations in planning programmatic experiences.

Images of Teaching

In the first week of their MAT program, these GPSTs were able to convey some clear, distinct images of teaching through both examples and nonexamples. They were able to articulate images that were quite progressive, such as notions of engaged and active learners and student-centered learning. This is contrary to the research literature that suggests preservice teachers enter teaching programs with beliefs reflecting teaching as giving of content, and learning as receiving content (Doyle, 1997; Richardson, 1996). In addition, the GPSTs frequently represented teachers in the data as being concerned about the role of others in the child's life and in their learning processes. Numerous GPSTs asserted that it was the teacher's responsibility to not only affect the child's learning in the classroom, but to also purposefully influence the ways in which the family valued and supported the child's education. GPSTs did not shirk their responsibilities as educators, although it is noteworthy that they only addressed the contextual pressures of teaching in very limited terms.

We are unsure the extent to which the GPSTs' perspectives derive from their own experiences. Did strong examples or nonexamples influence their subsequent images of teaching? We recommend that program faculty deliberately encourage GPSTs to identify their teaching beliefs, as the students may not even recognize their pervasive beliefs and certainly may not have articulated them. Armed with this information, teacher educators can plan for program experiences that will validate or act as dissonance for the GPSTs, understanding that persevering beliefs are part of the students' latent philosophy (Bolin, 1988) and are often difficult to reposition (Schommer, 1990; Weinstein, 1990). For example, because the pre-existing beliefs for this sample were quite progressive, we need to consider ways to support these beliefs through programmatic experiences. In addition, these GPSTs may experience dissonance when their progressive beliefs are challenged by traditional experiences in field placements. As teacher educators, we need to design experiences to help them make sense of this conflict. If the literature is accurate (Hollingsworth, 1989; Pajares, 1992; Wubbles, 1992), then the identification and articulation of beliefs is essential prior to any efforts to assimilate or accommodate new information.

Limited Understandings of Curriculum

Without exception, the GPSTs were able to describe instructional strategies for delivery of content knowledge, evoking numerous organizational structures such as centers, peer tutoring, literature circles, and learning groups. In other words, the GPSTs' writings situated curriculum as primarily the act of teaching content knowledge, but there was no reference *at all* to what they would teach in terms of national standards and the state curriculum. We are left wondering to what extent the GPSTs understand curriculum beyond the instruction of content.

None of the GPSTs referenced planning beyond the lesson plan, and there was a complete absence of statements about measurement or evaluation. They did not associate the act of teaching as being driven by assessment of students. This was the case in spite of the persistent and comprehensive focus by the regional and national media on student achievement, standardized assessment instruments, and legislative policy related to evaluation of students. Within the classroom, the assessment of discrete units of knowledge, such as weekly spelling tests and end-of-unit assessments, was not mentioned. As faculty, we recognize that the GPSTs will receive a healthy dose of federal and state policy, summative/formative testing, and assessment and evaluation coursework, both within the university and during their field experiences. Nonetheless, it was surprising to us, particularly given that several GPSTs are parents of school-aged children, that the role of evaluation in the classroom was not expressed. We wonder whether this phenomenon can be partially attributed to the fact that most of the GPSTs graduated from high school prior to the present educational climate emphasizing standardized student achievement. For this sample of GPSTs, it is what they chose NOT to include in their philosophy statements that provide insight for teacher educators in terms of needed coursework and experiences.

Implications of Beliefs

Consistent with the literature (Weinstein, 1988), the GPSTs' understandings of both teaching and the curriculum are illustrative of their naivety about the emphases of teaching in the current educational context and reflect a degree of idealism. On the other hand, they recognize classrooms as complex places, describing them in terms of emotional, social, and physical domains, and recognize the role of cognitive development in instruction. We question if these holistic notions of the child and of learning are derived from several students' backgrounds in psychology and the social sciences. This recognition of teaching as akin to caring (Noddings, 1999) is in some ways reassuring. Upon entry into an initial certification masters program, these students are able to convey notions of the whole child. On the other hand, we are also well aware that we need to prepare these GPSTs for an educational landscape where adequate yearly progress, high-stakes standardized testing, and school grades have encouraged the use of didactic teaching practices (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Teacher educators should aspire to prepare professional career educators, rather than short-term occupational teachers, and should not assume that GPSTs hold a broader world view of education simply because they are older. For this sample, we assert that it is essential to support the GPSTs' idealistic and worthy visions of teaching while enculturating them to the realities of present policy and curriculum in the elementary classroom.

Conclusion

The literature to date has been remiss in establishing preservice teacher beliefs for second-career educators. In limited ways, the GPSTs in this study remind us of seminal research on traditional undergraduate preservice teacher beliefs (Pajares, 1992). For example, the GPSTs' idealism and unfamiliarity of the curriculum in all its facets seems to mirror the literature on undergraduate preservice teachers' perspectives (Weinstein, 1988; 1990) and how they define successful teachers (Calderhead & Robson, 1991).

On the other hand, we perceive some distinctions in the data that warrant careful consideration by teacher educators who work with initial certification graduate students. Research indicates that second-career teachers bring strengths to their teaching (Mayotte, 2003), and the data in this study suggests similar findings. Unlike our "traditional" undergraduates who attended middle and high schools within the present era of high-stakes testing and view this emphasis as the norm, these GPSTs articulate different perspectives. Furthermore, these GPSTs bring background experiences, such as baccalaureate degrees in the Humanities, and values found in other career fields, that inform and shape their beliefs about teaching. They seem to suggest that education is an academic, social, and reciprocal enterprise.

We recognize that this study is limited to one cohort of graduate preservice teachers, and that these results are not generalizable. However, we believe that this study of GPSTs' pre-existing teacher beliefs will resonate with teacher educators. There is great value in understanding the beliefs that GPSTs bring into the classroom as a platform for designing teacher-preparation experiences, and we contend that teacher educators have an obligation to design course and field experiences that foster their professional development based on these beliefs. Furthermore, we suggest that this data informs continuing reflection about graduate certification programs and graduate students in teacher education. During a time when teacher shortages have resulted in the recruitment of second-career teachers, we recommend that further studies need to be conducted with this dynamic population. Additionally, we recommend expanding the study of graduate preservice teachers to include those seeking certification in secondary education. Perhaps similarities and differences between the two groups might inform program design in teacher education. It is our fervent hope that teacher educators can utilize this fledgling research-base to deliberately plan for GPST program experiences that address both the common and distinctive philosophies of this specific student population.

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APPENDIX

Prompts for Philosophy Assignment

- I believe that teaching and learning ...
- I believe my classroom is ...
- I believe all my students are/they learn best when they ...
- I believe my students learn best when I ...
- I believe community/family is/are ...
- I believe collaboration is ...